

[Chef Watkins' Alibi]

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New York New York Sleeping Car Porter

ON THE PENNSY

I - CHEF WATKINS' ALIBI

Chef Watkins was a short, fat squatty little Negro with the meanest disposition of any cook I've ever known; and I've known some mean ones in my time. He had a jet black skin, full pork-chop lips and a belly on him that shook like tapioca when he was working the lunch-hour rush. He could cuss like a top-sergeant and seemed to take a fiendish delight in giving the boys hell.

When we had taken about as much of his crap as we could stand, the boys got together and hatched up a plot to get rid of him. The trouble was, he stood in too well with the big bosses. He was one of those know kow -towing, old-fashioned, handkerchief-headed darkies who would grin and yes a white man to death and give his Negro subordinates hell from morning till night.

We all knew that Chef Watkins was killing the Company for everything he could steal. He had bought a huge, rambling old country house down in Maryland and a large breeding farm for jumping horses and prize stock and you can't do that on what the Pullman Company pays you even if you have worked for them twenty years and have full seniority rating.

Nothing was too big or too small for him to steal. He had worked out a system with the commissary steward and between them they did an awful lot of bill padding. In addition

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to that, he used to throw hams, chickens, legs of lamb and anything else off to his wife or children whenever he passed his place near Bowie. You know, that junction where the Pennsy crosses the Seaboard?

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Well, the boys got together and decided that Old Cheffie had to go. So what we did was to drop a little hint here and there to Mr. Palmer, our chief steward, that if he'd just happen around the kitchen when we were nearing that Seaboard crossing, he might find out what was happening to all our missing supplies that he was catching hell about back in the Now York commissary.

To make it short and sweet, when we neared the junction this day, Chef Watkins was busy, as usual, getting his hams and chickens together to toss out the window to his wife who was armed, as was customary, with her old potato sack in which she carried home the bacon; not to mention eggs (well-packed of course).

Just as the train slowed down and the chef leaned back, ham poised like a football about to take flight, Old Man Palmer drawled in that deep Southern accent, as only Old Man Plamer could: "What in hell do you think you're doin' there, Watkins?"

Well, you could have knocked the chef over with a feather. He stumbled, coughed and did everything but turn pale. It's the only time I've ever seen him stuck for words.

"Know one thing, Mr. Palmer?" he finally spluttered. "Dere's a ol' black, nappy-headed woman who stands out dere by duh crossin' and cusses me an' calls me all sorta names ever time I pass hyeah, an' it makes me so mad I Jus' jus' grabs up duh fus thing I gits mah han's on an th'ows it at 'er."

II - CHEF SAMPSON'S ICE BOX

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When we were running on the Pennsy, there was an old chef on our run who was the most onery old cuss you ever heard of. His name was Sampson and he could out-cuss a blue streak. He was a dictator in his kitchen and there was hell to pay any time the dining car waiters and cooks assistants did not hew the line as far as chef's kitchen-rules were concerned.

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There was one thing he was particularly mean about. He didn't allow anybody, not even the steward or second cook, to go into his ice box. The steward had the right to, of course, but even he used to humor the old man because he was so efficient in his work. And any time the second or third cooks wanted anything, they had to say:

"Going in, Chef!"

Meaning, of course, the ice box. Well, if he felt in the mood, he'd say:

"Go 'head in!"

If he didn't, the answer would be:

"Wait a minute. I'll git it for you. I got my box 'ranged jus' lak I want it an' I don't want it mixed up."

We also had an inspector named Mister Trout. He was a tall, rangy, mean-looking cracker from down in Georgia. He used to pop up unexpectedly in all sort of little out of the way stations, board the train and start gum-shoeing around, seeing what he sees. Well, this day he climbs aboard at Altoona and just when we're speeding through the mountains to Pittsburgh, Old Man Trout eases back into the kitchen and starts rummaging through Chef's ice box. Chef had his back turned and was busy chopping some onions on a board near the window. He heard the commotion, however, and, without turning around said:

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"Git the hell outa dat ice box."

Old Man Trout said nothing, but continued his inspection.

"Git outa dat ice box, I say!" Chef repeated, still without turning around.

Old Man Trout straightened up to his full six, rawbony feet, took one contemptuous look at Chef Sampson and said:

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"Who in hell do you think you're talkin' to? My name is TROUT!"

Chef Sampson stared back as cool as you please. Finally he drawled:

"I wouldn't give a damn if it's CATFISH. You git duh hell outa my ice box!"